

Paul Tillich: Beyond the Symbols

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INTRODUCTION

In his history on the development of modern theology, Roger Olsen stated that those “who expect Christian theologians to adhere to anything like the classical Protestant *sola scriptura* will be unable to understand the neo-liberals” (Bultmann, Tillich, et al) of the twentieth century.¹ Paul Tillich’s philosophical theology was not concerned with the classic kerygma of the Christian faith, nor with the concept of an inspired and infallible canon of Scripture. Tillich, with the theologians of Europe, was profoundly affected by the horrific violence and destruction of two world wars. The history of Europe since the Reformation was marked by a series of religious wars. For Tillich, the classical Christian kerygma and the liberal ideal of the progression of humanity had failed to establish a flourishing human civilization. Therefore, he sought to reimagine the Christian kerygma for a post-war, post-modern, and post-Christian secular world. Tillich declared, “My whole theological work has been directed to the interpretation of religious symbols in such a way that the secular man – and we are all secular – can understand and be moved by them.”² It is Tillich’s “interpretation of religious symbols” that is the primary concern of this paper. This paper will offer a dialogue in which Tillich’s interpretation of religious symbols is compared and contrasted with a Pentecostal hermeneutic of signs and wonders. Then I will discuss some pastoral implications for Tillich’s thought.

¹ Roger E. Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology: From Reconstruction to Deconstruction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 372.

² D. Mackenzie Brown, editor, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in Dialogue* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1956), 88-89.

As a Wesleyan-Pentecostal, I remain committed to the *primacy of Holy Scripture* as interpreted through the *received tradition* of the classic theologians. Furthermore, I acknowledge that God has revealed God's self in creation so that God's attributes can be perceived and *understood through reason* (Romans 1:20). As a Pentecostal who embraces the inspiration and primacy of Holy Scripture, I also embrace truth as it is revealed in the sciences. Lactantius, a fourth century Christian apologist, declared, "There is no one so uncivilized and ignorant who, when he looks up to the heavens, ... does not understand ... that the things that exist in such wonderful order must have been created by some higher intelligence..."³ The wonders of creation proclaim the glory of the Creator. As a human being, created in the divine image, I encounter God in the context of God's world and this lived *experience* informs my imagination, that is, my experience shapes the way I understand God and God's world. The Pentecostal imagination is informed by signs and wonders.

SYMBOLS AS COMMUNICATION

Symbols are the earliest form of human communication. Ancient, pre-literate humans stenciled pictographs on cave walls. The oldest of these may date back sixty-five thousand years and be of Neanderthal origin.⁴ The oldest written form of human language, Sumerian cuneiform, is a collection of pictographs and symbols that represent various sounds of a spoken language. Even the letters of the modern English alphabet are symbols that when correctly arranged and pronounced form a spoken language.

Symbols are the communication of culture, the substance of religious and political life. The shielded eagle on the reverse of a United States half dollar clutching an olive branch with one claw, arrows with the other, encircled by fifty stars, represents a national culture of a free people who prefer peace, but are willing to wage war to preserve the national culture. That single image



US Half Dollar Reverse

³ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 1.2–1.3. Quoted in: Gerald L. Bray and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *We Believe in One God, vol. 1*, Ancient Christian Doctrine (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 112.

⁴ D. L. Hoffmann et al., U-Th dating of carbonate crusts reveals Neandertal origin of Iberian cave art. *Science* 359, 912-915 (2018). DOI:10.1126/science.aap7778

reflects the words of the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, and a political philosophy of federalism that unites the diverse states, commonwealths, and territories of the nation. Symbols convey meaning and mediate reality in visual, auditory, and linguistic ways. Symbols are dynamic expressions of the human imagination that reveal levels of meaning from the mundane to the transcendent and invite the observer into existential participation.⁵ Symbols communicate power. The sight of the American flag with the accompanying singing of the “Star Spangled Banner” can provoke profound emotions of allegiance. The signal of a red light can bring traffic to a halt. Even so, symbols can be ambiguous, even contradictory. The image of a cross represents a cruel form of execution to a Roman, divine sacrificial love to the believing Christian, and militarism and warfare to the Muslim. For the Christian, the single symbol of the cross embodies hundreds of thousands of inscripturated words – the totality of the Christian message (1 Corinthians 2:2). The cross is “to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called” the cross is the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23-24).⁶ Therefore, symbols require a process of interpretation. But one must be careful, for the very nature of the symbol implies mystery, that is, the symbol is beyond linguistic definition. The study of signs and symbols and their interpretation is *semiotics*. Symbol is the language of the imagination through which humans “contemplate, comprehend, and assimilate disparate elements of reality which are often inaccessible to other modes of cognition.”⁷ Symbol allows imperceptible reality to be expressed and understood, even if it cannot be explained through words and language. The interpreter of symbol must also keep in mind that the meaning of a symbol can change. For example, the swastika is an ancient religious symbol for prosperity and good fortune that originated in Sanskrit. But in the twentieth century, the swastika was adapted and adopted by the National Socialist Party of

⁵ Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol, and Myth in Religion and Theology* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), 106, 110.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture cited in this paper is from the *New American Standard Bible* (LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation, 2020).

⁷ Gloria L. Schaab, “Sacred Symbol as Theological Text,” *Heythrop Journal* (2009), 59.

Germany (Nazi) and has come to represent the evils of political oppression and holocaust.⁸



Hindu Swastika



Nazi Swastika

In the field of semiotics there is a distinction between *signs* and *symbols*. A *sign* refers to a specific reality, but is not intrinsically connected to the reality. A *symbol* mediates reality, that is, it makes present that which it symbolizes.⁹ A *sign* has a specific and limited meaning. A *symbol* is pregnant with meaning. For example, smoke is a *sign* of fire, but it is not itself fire. A flame is a *symbol* of fire and is in reality the substance of fire. As symbol, a flame transcends itself and signifies a greater reality beyond itself. The burning bush of Mt. Sinai is a symbol of the divine presence, but the substance of the fire is not God. The burning bush was not consumed by the fire and produced no smoke. As symbol, the burning bush transcends the nature of fire and makes God present. As symbol of God, the burning bush transformed the mountain into holy ground.

Semiotics has been a significant endeavor in the development of Christian theology. The ritual observance of Water Baptism and Holy Communion are sacramental symbols filled with meaning. By the middle of the second century these rituals developed into new forms of religious practice that shaped the Christian theological imagination.¹⁰ These symbolic rituals are expressions of the Faith, convey grace, and signify transformation. The sign and symbols of Christian observance and celebration are rooted in creation and in human culture. Humans explain divine encounter through symbols and signs, language and gestures, that mediate revelation. The Bible is replete with signs and symbols. The first word of God in Holy Scripture –

⁸ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online* s.v. “swastika.” Internet: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/swastika>

⁹ Gloria L. Schaab, 61.

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 361.

“Let there be light” (Genesis 1:3) – is an expression of creation, but transcends nature. Light is symbolic of God’s self (Psalm 44:3; 104:2; Isaiah 10:17; John 1:4-9; 8:12; 1 Timothy 6:16; Revelation 22:5). Likewise, water is symbolic of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:16; John 4:10, 14; 7:37-38); the Passover Lamb is symbolic of the crucifixion of Christ (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 1 Peter 1:19; Revelation 5:6); and the blood of Christ is symbolic of human salvation (Matthew 26:28; John 6:54; Romans 3:25; 5:9; Ephesians 1:7, et al). Throughout the New Testament, Jesus and his apostles performed symbolic gestures – laying on hands and anointing with oil to heal the sick (Mark 5:23; 6:13; 7:32; James 5:14), shaking the dust off the soles of one’s feet as symbolic of judgement (Mark 6:11), or breathing on the disciples to convey the Spirit (John 20:22). These symbols and gestures conveyed profound meaning beyond their immediate context. Karl Rahner has written, “All beings are by their nature symbolic because they necessarily express themselves in order to attain their own nature.”¹¹ Through symbol, humans communicate inner realities that are inexpressible by any other means.¹² In the creation narrative, God has created human beings in the divine image (Genesis 1:26-27). Humanity is ontologically oriented toward God because humanity is a symbol of God and derives meaning from God.

In fact, the entire cosmos is symbolic of God as Creator. God is imagined through creation – wind, light, fire, et al. However, God as Creator is the ground of being for all that exists and is therefore beyond symbolic. The signs and symbols of creation can reveal the attributes of God, but cannot reveal God’s self. God is the self-existent One and is therefore utterly separated from the created order (Exodus 3:14). Therefore, no image, no likeness, no symbol can adequately express the divine being and attempts to do so are forbidden (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 5:8). Even so, the world is open to divine intervention because God is “the transcendental ground of the world” who from

¹¹ Karl Rahner, “The Theology of Symbol,” *Theological Investigations, Volume 4* (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1966), 224.

¹² Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1971, 1999), 65.

the beginning embedded God's self in the world as "its self-communicating ground."¹³ This makes the Incarnation possible.

To understand Paul Tillich, one must understand the theological and philosophical categories of sign and symbol, and how Tillich appropriates symbol. For Tillich, religious symbols reveal the Divine to the human and the human to the Divine. Through religious symbols, there is mutual participation – communication and communion.¹⁴ Tillich can be misunderstood because he favors ambiguity over clarity. In fact, in reading those who seek to dialogue with Tillich, it becomes apparent that his dialogue partners are sometimes uncertain as to what he is saying. This can make reading and understanding Tillich a challenge, especially for one who is accustomed to classical expressions of the Christian faith.

PAUL TILlich'S USE OF SYMBOL

In his philosophical theology, Tillich sought to create new ways of imagining God, new symbols that might reveal the divine to a secular age. This was a movement among many German theologians of the twentieth century informed by the "death of God" philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. Rudolph Bultmann sought to demythologize the Christian faith encouraging interpreters to replace traditional theology with existential philosophy making the reality of Jesus' teachings more comprehensible to modern educated readers.¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted on a "religionless Christianity" that might speak to "a completely religionless time."¹⁶ For Bonhoeffer, the institutional Christendom of Europe had utterly failed to be faithful to the person of Jesus Christ. The secularization of theology reached its culmination with the "death of God" theologies

¹³ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1978), 87.

¹⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume One* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1951, 1973), 177.

¹⁵ Stanley Kalalo, Antoni Bastian and David Ming, "Bultmann's Thoughts: Demitologization and Its Impact on the Contemporary Christianity Today," *European Journal of Theology and Philosophy* (November 2021). Online: DOI: 10.24018/theology.2021.1.6.4., 1.

¹⁶ Geoffrey B. Kelly and F. Burton Nelson, editors, *A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1990), 42.

popularized by *Time* magazine with the publication of “Is God Dead?” on April 8, 1966.¹⁷ The trajectory of secular theology is that God cannot be known, or does not exist, and therefore has little consequence in human life.

The question posed by *Time* was absurd. During this era there were many Christian renewal movements. The Roman Catholic Church sought to renew itself for ministry in a modern world through the work of Vatican II (1962-1965). Billy Graham was at the peak of his career preaching the gospel of the Evangelical movement. The Pentecostals and Charismatics, which probably represent the most significant Christian movement since the Reformation, were flourishing throughout the world. The God of the elites may have died, but the God of the masses was alive and well.

Although Paul Tillich’s work would certainly not be representative of Pope Paul VI, Billy Graham, or the Pentecostals; neither was he a “God is dead” theologian. In fact, Tillich sought to reimagine the Christian faith as an answer to those who wished to dismiss the Faith. Tillich understood that the development of the human imagination was a priority in religious knowledge. Through the use of symbols “a finite reality can become the basis for an assertion about the infinite ... because the infinite is being-itself, and because everything participates in being-itself.”¹⁸ Therefore, theological and philosophical symbols can be more important than words, more important than rational dialogue. Symbols can better express the deepest longings of humanity. Tillich sought to proclaim the Christian message by developing new symbols that would capture the imagination of secularized humans – those who were indifferent or even hostile to religion. Tillich’s use of symbolism is characterized by ambiguity, vagueness, generalization, and mystification.¹⁹ This can allow for a more individualistic interpretation of symbols, which could lead to a more individualistic expression of faith. This ambiguity of symbol allows for Christian symbols to transcend Christianity and be appropriated by other religions.

¹⁷ Macgregor, Kirk B., *Contemporary Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, IL: Zondervan, 2019), 191.

¹⁸ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume One*, 239f.

¹⁹ John P. Newport, *Paul Tillich* (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 216-217.

All too often, the use of symbol in Christian theology among certain modernist Catholics and Protestants has the effect of minimizing, or weakening, the meaning, power, and impact of the being/object to which the symbol refers. Fundamentalists, including Pentecostal Fundamentalists, can fall into the same hermeneutical temptation by insisting on literalism over symbolism. For example, let us consider the significance of God as Father. If we insist on a literal interpretation, then we reduce the uncreated and eternal God to a gendered human-like being. The literal way of understanding God is idolatrous, and forbidden in the Torah (Deuteronomy 4:15-16). Tillich resists this tendency by insisting that “symbolic interpretation is proper and necessary [because] it enhances rather than diminishes the reality and power of religious language...”²⁰ If we insist that God as Father is a theological symbol, then we acknowledge that the symbol refers to One who is greater than the symbol. The symbol of Father possesses a sacramental depth in which human relationships are elevated and sanctified. To suggest that God as Father is a symbol does not deny the reality of God, rather it insists upon a transcendent reality.²¹ Symbol does not necessarily imply unreal, or nonpersonal; rather it transcends empirical observation and insist on realities that are beyond human imagination, beyond the created order. Theological symbol does not necessarily deny a historical event like creation, the virginal conception of Christ, or the resurrection of Christ. Rather, it forces us to look beyond the historical event, beyond the science, to discover ultimate meaning. This is the task of theology.

TILlich’S APOCALYPTIC EXISTENTIALISM

Tillich’s theology may be grounded in existentialism, but it is framed with apocalyptic concerns. Tillich came of age in World War I. He found a new home – emotional and intellectual – in the United States during World War II. His theology was formulated during the nuclear age of cold war that threatened the survival of human civilization. One might suggest that the primary symbol for Tillich’s existentialist theology is the mushroom cloud of an atomic explosion. Tillich’s ultimate question was,

²⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume One*, 241.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 240f.

“Will humanity survive?” Tillich declared, “... the feeling of living in an ultimately secure world has been destroyed through the catastrophes of the twentieth century...”²² His theological quest is a human journey threatened by non-being, characterized by the despair of estrangement, in which the remedy is New Being. The essence of human *being* is found in participation with the divine life. In the language of Genesis, human *being* is grounded in the image of God. Tillich considers the created, but fallen, nature of humanity to be “the most mysterious point in human existence.”²³ Human existence is ambiguous, that is, humanity exists in tension between self-actualization and estrangement. Self-actualization means that humans exist independent of God, but this freedom is expressed in estrangement. For Tillich, humanity is an ontological contradiction. The Fall is a symbol of humanity’s predicament.²⁴

Tillich prefers the symbol of estrangement over the biblical notion of sin. The sense of estrangement is intuitive in the human soul and it drives humans to seek fulfillment, or self-actualization. This is a quest for New Being. The symbol of “Jesus as the Christ” transcends the historical Jesus. Tillich does not deny the historical events associated with the Incarnation. However, he insists the historical events are irretrievable, that is, the events are not empirically verifiable. This is of little concern to him. The truth of Jesus is discovered in the symbol of Jesus as New Being. In Jesus, existence and essential being are united. Jesus overcomes estrangement and the human tendency towards self-destruction.²⁵ In Jesus, humans move from the threat of non-being to the self-actualization of New Being. In Jesus, God and humanity are united. Even so, Tillich does not embrace Nicene definitions of classic Christology. He prefers to see the symbol of the incarnation as God-man-unity rather than the union of divine and human substance. Tillich prefers a low Christology in which Jesus is essentially human. According to Tillich, only this human Christ can bring humanity to self-actualization.²⁶ Self-actualization is a threefold process of self-integration which is fulfilled in the

²² Ibid., 263

²³ Ibid., 255.

²⁴ Ibid., 260f.

²⁵ John P. Newport, 119.

²⁶ Ibid., 121.

morality of love; self-creativity as expressed in human culture; and self-transcendence in which human being is driven towards ultimate meaning.²⁷ The symbol for the conquest of estrangement is the sinlessness of Jesus as the Christ.²⁸ The image of Jesus dying on the cross need not signify a historical event. Rather, it is a symbol that represents estrangement.²⁹ For Tillich, the mythical has priority over the historical.³⁰ The person of Jesus became the Christ through self-actualization in manifestation of The Spiritual Presence.

THE SPIRITUAL PRESENCE

Tillich speaks of the Holy Spirit as The Spiritual Presence which symbolizes “a dimension of life” in which the human spirit may be actualized.³¹ This has priority in Tillich’s thought as the “*first symbol expressing unambiguous life*” (emphasis added).³² Tillich writes that the nature of revelatory experience is ecstatic. The ecstasy of The Spiritual Presence does not destroy the rational structure of the human spirit, but “when it grasps man, it creates unambiguous life.”³³ The Spiritual Presence has a “miraculous character” which “changes the body,” generates new life, and has “psychological effects of an extraordinary character which endow the intellect” with powers beyond a person’s natural capacities. This includes “strange tongues, penetration into the innermost thoughts of another person, and healing influences.” The human spirit receives the impact of The Spiritual Presence through inspiration and infusion. The Spiritual Presence is “a meaning-bearing power.”³⁴

²⁷ Ibid., 129f.

²⁸ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume Two* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1957, 1975), 126.

²⁹ Ibid., 89.

³⁰ Ibid., 74.

³¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume Three* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 111.

³² Ibid., 107.

³³ Ibid., 112.

³⁴ Ibid., 114-115.

The Spirit is the central link between the concerns of self-integration, self-creativity, and self-transcendence. Tillich rejects the classic pneumatology of the Holy Spirit as divine person in favor of an ambiguous spirit that is “the union of power and meaning” in which nature participates and comes to itself.³⁵ Tillich understands human salvation in terms of ecstatic emergence of self-actualization.³⁶ God is the “ground of life,” that is, “the ground of everything personal” – the unifying power of all life.³⁷ God is spirit who is “present in communities and personalities, grasping them, inspiring them, and transforming them.”³⁸ God is “the inner movement of divine life as an eternal separation from itself and returns to itself.”³⁹ Trinity is a symbol that “expresses the dialectical process of being.”⁴⁰ The ambiguous god of Tillich is tri-symbolic. The Father is symbolic of creative power, the Son is symbolic of saving love, and the Spirit is symbolic of ecstatic transformation.⁴¹

The second symbol of unambiguous life is the Kingdom of God. Humanity’s historical existence is tenuous because of the presence of the demonic. The demonic is a symbol of the instability that is embedded in the structures of being. There is a continuous struggle between being and non-being. Demonic structures are the source of “disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness, and despair in all realms of life.”⁴² Even so, Tillich wrote, “The dimension of history is actualized, on the one hand, in historical events which reach out of the past and determine the present, and on the other hand, in the historical tension which is experienced in the present, but runs irreversibly into the future.”⁴³ The presence of the Kingdom of God is a symbol of hope that humanity, and all being, will survive.

³⁵ Ibid., 35f.

³⁶ Ibid., 37.

³⁷ Ibid., 48.

³⁸ Ibid., 52.

³⁹ Ibid., 60.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 57.

⁴¹ Ibid., 85.

⁴² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume One*, 49.

⁴³ Paul Tillich. *Systematic Theology, Volume Three*, 108.

The third symbol of unambiguous life is Eternal Life in which unambiguous life conquers all categorical limits of existence.⁴⁴ Tillich is not concerned with a traditional eschatology of endless time. Eternal Life is a symbol in which past and present meet in the eternal now.⁴⁵ We are always facing the eternal. Eternal Life is the conquest of non-being. Because all created life is rooted in the eternal ground of being, non-being cannot prevail.⁴⁶ Eternal Life “includes the positive content of history, liberated from its negative distortions and fulfilled in its potentialities.”⁴⁷ Because God is the ground of all being, the *eschaton* is embedded in creation. Eternal Life is life “in God,” life sustained by the “supporting power of permanent divine creativity,” and a “life of ultimate fulfillment.”⁴⁸ The resurrection of Jesus is the symbol of New Being that overcomes all structures of non-being.⁴⁹ According to Tillich, Eternal Life should not be understood in terms of “a revived (and transmuted) body” or “the reappearance of an individual soul.” Rather, New Being has “the character of a spiritual presence.”⁵⁰ Tillich’s theology is born in the shadow of the mushroom cloud that symbolizes the demonic threat of non-being in the twentieth century. But he envisions hope. The structures of New Being will overcome the demonic and prevail.

ASSESSMENT

Tillich was considered to be the foremost Protestant theologian in North America by some, and “denounced by some Orthodox Christian believers as not a Christian at all.”⁵¹ Roger Olsen compared Tillich to Justin Martyr, both of whom sought to communicate the essential truths of the Christian faith to a skeptical audience; and has

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 395.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 415.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 397.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 421.

⁴⁹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Volume Two*, 156.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 157.

⁵¹ *Time* 73.11 (March 16, 1959), “Religion: To Be or Not to Be,” 46. Online: <https://time.com/archive/6870089/religion-to-be-or-not-to-be/>

suggested that Paul Tillich and Karl Barth are the two most influential theologians of the twentieth century.⁵² It is likely that Tillich's influence was due to the fact that he gave voice to the existential anxiety that plagued the nuclear age. Andrew Finstuen has written that Paul Tillich and Billy Graham were similar in that neither offered a superficial self-help Christianity, but addressed the darkness of human nature made evident by the violence of two world wars.⁵³ If we are to judge Tillich by the standard of the Nicene Creed, he is heterodox. Like many twentieth century theologians, Tillich was indeed trying to offer a new paradigm for doing Christian theology. In doing so, he demonstrated little regard for the theological traditions of historical Christianity.

Tillich's use of semiotics in the construction of his thought gives conservatives, who insist that that primary meaning of the biblical text must be historical and literal, great concern. Again, we must acknowledge that Tillich did not deny the literal or historical nature of the Faith, but insisted that the nature of the Faith transcends history. It might be helpful to read Tillich in light of two classic Christian thinkers – Origen of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo.

Origen wrote, "that the Scriptures were written by the Spirit of God, and have a meaning, not such only as is apparent at first sight, but also another, which escapes the notice of most. For those (words) which are written are the forms of certain mysteries, and the images of divine things..."⁵⁴ Origen speaks of *forms* and *images* with *meaning* that transcends *first sight*. For Origen, even that which is literal and historical has spiritual meaning which can be discerned only by those on "whom the grace of the Holy Spirit is bestowed in the word of wisdom and knowledge."⁵⁵ Origen insisted that the truth of history should be preserved, but that the student of Scripture must seek the

⁵² Roger Olson, 373.

⁵³ Andrew S. Finstuen, *Original Sin and Everyday Protestants: The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Billy Graham, and Paul Tillich in an Age of Anxiety* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

⁵⁴ Origen, "De Principiis," in *Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second*, ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, trans. Frederick Crombie, vol. 4, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1885), 241.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

whole meaning, that is, one must discern the allegorical meaning from the literal.⁵⁶ Origen offered an example: “But when we read either in the Old Testament or in the New of the anger of God, we do not take such expressions literally, but seek in them a spiritual meaning, that we may think of God as He deserves to be thought of.”⁵⁷ The classic doctrine immutability declares that God, who exists in perfection, is not capable of change. Therefore, God who is perfect in love, cannot be moved to anger. To speak of the love of God, or the anger of God, is to speak in terms of metaphor or allegory – an anthropomorphic symbol that transcends literal expression. According to Origen, those who refuse to discern the spiritual sense of the Scriptures may fall into heresy. He wrote, “Now the cause... of the false opinions, and of the impious statements or ignorant assertions about God, appears to be nothing else than the not understanding the Scripture according to its spiritual meaning, but the interpretation of it agreeably to the mere letter.”⁵⁸ Even so, the allegorical, or spiritual, interpretation must differ “in no respect from ecclesiastical and apostolical tradition.”⁵⁹

Augustine insisted, “All instruction is either about things or about signs; but things are learnt by means of signs.”⁶⁰ In other words, physical objects are things that can signify other things, objects can have deeper meaning. The ram which Abraham offered up as a substitute for Isaac signified Isaac, and something much deeper – the ram was a symbol of Jesus Christ as the Lamb of God. Augustine wrote, “For a sign is a thing which, over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into the mind as a consequence of itself.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ Origen, *De Principiis* 4.1.20.

⁵⁷ Origen, *De Principiis* 2.4.4.

⁵⁸ Origen, *De Principiis* 4.1.7.

⁵⁹ Origen, *De Principiis*, Preface 2.

⁶⁰ Augustine of Hippo, “On Christian Doctrine,” in *St. Augustin’s City of God and Christian Doctrine*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. F. Shaw, vol. 2, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 523.

⁶¹ Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.1.

Augustine further suggested that words are signs. Words always signify something beyond themselves.⁶² For example, the term *God* signifies something, and someone, much greater than the term itself – “God is that which excels in dignity all other objects.”⁶³ Words, especially divinely inspired words, have power. The inspired words of Holy Scripture are a remedy for “the terrible diseases of the human will.”⁶⁴ Even so, Holy Scripture is often misunderstood by “hasty and careless readers” who fail to properly interpret the “manifold obscurities and ambiguities” contained within.⁶⁵ The words, gestures, and signs contained in Holy Scripture have a figurative significance [that] undoubtedly conveys a secret sense.⁶⁶ Augustine exclaimed, “It is a wretched slavery which takes the figurative expression of Scripture in a literal sense.”⁶⁷

So, what does Origen and Augustine have to do with Tillich? Tillich’s use of symbol in his theological method finds support in these ancient theologians. The theological imagination requires more than rationality, it must give place to mystery. The task of theology must go beyond words, and embrace signs and symbols. Tillich appropriated symbol in his method in an effort to interpret religious meaning to a secular culture. When Tillich declares that God is a symbol for the ultimate ground of being, Augustine might respond, “Yes and amen!” Many Pentecostal theologians have found Tillich to be helpful because his use of symbol is familiar to the Pentecostal imagination which gives priority to signs and wonders.

Pentecostal spirituality is associated with *τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα* (wonders and signs) – rushing wind, tongues of fire, and tongues-speech – which provoke a sense of awe among the people (Acts 2:1ff; 2:43). Signs and wonders signify God’s intervention in the history of humanity and are the “distinguishing marks” of apostolic ministry (2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:4). Wonders and signs are theophanic, that is, they are

⁶² Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.2.

⁶³ Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine* 1.7.

⁶⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.4.

⁶⁵ Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.6.7; cf. 2.10.15.

⁶⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.16.23.

⁶⁷ Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Doctrine* 3.5

manifestations of God's presence, testify of God's works, and they are theological symbols that mediate grace. In the words of Tillich, wonders and signs are theological symbols that provoke a revelatory experience that is ecstatic, with miraculous character that generates new life, and has extraordinary psychological effects which endows the human intellect. Pentecostals envision a life-giving Spirit who engages all aspects and realities of the world, and fills the cosmos. Theology that transforms the imagination with meaning-filled symbols creates a new culture.

Tillich's theology is filled with symbols familiar to Pentecostals, but his dismissal of the classical Christian tradition means that his symbols are ambiguous, and with ambiguity symbols lose meaning – they cease to be exclusively *Christian*. Of course, that is Tillich's trajectory. His theological symbols are intended to transcend all religious institutions and systems and inform a secular spirituality.

An example of Tillich's spirituality can be found in the work of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) in which the acknowledgment of a higher power is essential to their twelve-step program. AA insist that successful treatment of alcoholism requires "a spiritual basis of life" – "*a power greater than ourselves.*" This higher power is God "even though it [is] impossible for any of us to fully define or comprehend that Power..." This "Spirit of the Universe" is the underlying totality of all things. The realm of this Spirit is "broad, roomy, all inclusive." The God of AA is one's "own conception of God." This God is acceptable to agnostics and atheists.⁶⁸ The ambiguous higher power of AA is not associated with any particular religious tradition and does not refer to any specific deity. Most participants of AA superimpose the religion of their culture onto the concept of the higher power.

The secular spirituality of Tillich is prevalent in the popular culture of the United States and is proclaimed in the statement "I'm spiritual, but not religious." According to the Pew Research Center, 21% of Americans are neither spiritual nor religious; 58% consider themselves to be religious; and 22% of Americans identify as "spiritual but not

⁶⁸ *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How More Than One Hundred Men Have Recovered from Alcoholism, 4th Edition* (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001), 44, 46-47, 49.

religious” (SBNR). The SBNR typically believe that a spiritual energy pervades nature. “For example, 78% of SBNR Americans say that spirits or spiritual energies can reside in animals other than humans.” And 71% of SBNRs say spirits can reside in parts of nature like mountains, rivers or trees...” The primary spiritual practices of the SBNR include spending time in nature and centering meditation. It is unlikely that the SBNRs are affiliated with a spiritual community. Only 2% of SBNRs attend a weekly religious service. Most SBNRs say that “being connected with my true self” is essential to being spiritual (72%). Only 11% of SBNRs feel connected to something bigger than themselves. The typical SBNR is a white female who leans left politically.⁶⁹ Many SBNRs are atheist or agnostic, and those who profess belief in God diverge from traditional Christian viewpoints.⁷⁰

It is difficult to assess whether or not Tillich influenced the spirituality of AA or the SBNRs, but it seems apparent that Tillich, AA, and the SBNRs are representative of a secularized spirituality. The secularization of faith has many expressions, even in the Evangelical and Pentecostal movements in which the sanctuary, or cathedral, has given way to the worship center stripped of Christian language and symbols in an effort to be sensitive to the doubts of a postmodern culture. There are questions to be answered. “Does a secularized spirituality remedy the angst of estrangement?” Can an ambiguous god lead an estranged human to the unambiguous life in New Being? Can a secularized Evangelicalism, free of religious symbols, effectively disciple young men and women?

Tillich’s ambiguous god and secular spirituality leave me ambivalent. Tillich’s primary contribution is that his use of symbol requires a greater theological imagination that moves us beyond creedal affirmation and allows for mystery. It is here that traditional Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Pentecostals find common ground in which the supernatural is embraced. The use of theological symbol, within the perimeters of classic Nicene Christianity, can move us beyond Tillich’s ambiguous God, beyond the

⁶⁹ Becka A. Alper, Michael Rotolo, Patricia Tevington, Justin Nortey, Asta Kallo, *Spirituality Among Americans* (Pew Research Center, 2023), 69-86. Online: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/12/07/who-are-spiritual-but-not-religious-americans/>

⁷⁰ “Meet the Spiritual but Not Religious,” *Barna* (April 6, 2017). Online: <https://www.barna.com/research/meet-spiritual-not-religious/>

literalism of Fundamentalism, to a mysterious and glorious God who provokes awe and wonder.

The story of the demonized boy (Mark 9) can be helpful. The father of the demonized boy confessed, “I believe, help my unbelief.” This is the cry of postmodernity. We want to believe, but we find it difficult to believe, or to know what to believe. The disciples and the father are engaged in an existential struggle. The disciples couldn’t exorcise the demon. The disciples struggled with belief and unbelief. Can this demon be exorcised? In our era, we ponder, is the boy really demonized? Or, is he suffering from a mental disorder, from chemical imbalances in his brain, or an oppressive system? Can evil be rebuked, or medicated? Does evil really exist? Does God care? Can God act? Can God be known? What does suffering mean? What does prayer mean? What does it mean to be human? Are we among the higher apes? Or, are we the image of God?

We don’t know what to believe about evil, about God, about faith. The secularism of postmodernity pervades the church. The Bible has become little more than fables, illustrations to be used in weekly self-help talks. Sacraments are meaningless, of no effect, rarely celebrated. We no longer need anointing oil because we have antibiotics. The concept of the sacred, of holiness, eludes us. Worship no longer provokes awe of God; rather it is entertaining. The postmodern and secular Pentecostal has moved the epicenter of worship from the altar to the stage. The ecstasy of Spirit baptism is replaced with the exciting rhythms of worship music. Speaking in tongues is no longer anointed speech, but annoying speech relegated to an off-stage prayer room.

Postmodernity has led us into an anxious skepticism that makes apostasy easy. Apostates are no longer infamous, but famous. Heretics are celebrated. It seems as if everyone is coming out – there is an exodus from the Faith. The fabricated god of postmodern secular Christianity doesn’t provoke fear, or encourage faith.

As the disciples ponder their ineffectiveness, as the father grieves, as the demonized boy convulses on the ground, Jesus makes an entrance. In the midst of this existential struggle, Jesus rebukes the unbelief of the disciples and encourages the father to believe. But who is this Jesus? Is he a magician with a bag of tricks? Or worse, a charlatan willing to take advantage of these superstitious folk? Postmodern skepticism

will not allow us to see Jesus as the gospel presents him, as the Spirit-baptized divine-human Son of God, the transfigured One, the suffering One, the resurrected One. How we answer the question of Jesus will determine how we believe. Is Jesus the Lord? Or is he the union of man and myth, little more than a comic book/movie super hero?

In the midst of postmodern skepticism, Jesus encourages us to believe – to believe in him, to believe in God – a God who loves, a God who intervenes, a God who rebukes evil, a God who saves. In effect, Jesus encourages us to look through the facades of postmodernism and believe in another possibility – New Creation. The notion of new creation deconstructs postmodernity.

Like the father, we cry out, “I believe, help my unbelief.” That’s enough for Jesus to act. Just a little faith, even faith immersed in doubt. Maybe that’s the best we can do in this age of postmodern skepticism. Even so, I find myself yearning for something deeper, something authentic, something mysterious, something powerful.

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